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ABSTRACT

Data on students participating in six peer-response groups in a college writing workshop revealed the role of student writers in weaving the web of critical response during the peer group discussion. Analysis showed that the student writers engaged in four main types of verbal activity concerning their papers: (1) asking questions about their essays, including general requests for criticism, requests for recommendations on specific passages, and questions about group members' suggestions and comments; (2) proposing their own suggestions for revising their work; (3) expressing agreement or disagreement with the recommendations of their peers; and (4) explaining the intentions behind their stylistic choices. These results bore testimony not only to the value of the peer-response experience but also to the limitations frequently associated with this approach. For example, writers are not sure of their role in the peer-response process, whether to sit and listen or to constantly interrupt others and defend themselves. Writers also have difficulty in detaching or distancing themselves from their writing. These limitations indicate that composition teachers need to instruct students as to the nature and purpose of criticism and the dynamics of peer feedback in the workshop discussion approach. Teachers should also provide clear, explicit directions for the critiquing process and institute procedures for collecting data on group responses over several sessions. (RL)

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WEAVING THE WEB OF MEANING: INTERACTION PATTERNS IN PEER-RESPONSE GROUPS

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My title for this presentation, "Weaving the Web of Meaning," calls attention to the fact that real communication is always a fluid, active, collaborative process: even if only one person is speaking, the listener is engaged in the task of "making out" the speaker's meaning, reconstructing what the speaker intends. These verbs -- making, reconstructing, weaving, and similar terms -- thus emphasize the active participation that is necessary if one person is to understand another. Further, because the process is active, it is also fluid, tentative: no one human utterance can contain all that a speaker intends, so modification and elaboration are frequently necessary; the listener, too, often reinterprets an earlier utterance of the speaker's in light of something that is said later. Thus the process is a collaborative one: even in a hostile argument, the participants are still continually interpreting one another's meanings and working with those meanings.

It is not of course a situation of hostile argument that I am examining here, but one of genuine cooperation. Concretely, I would like to present some of the results of a study I did just over two years ago at Michigan State University. This study involved tape recording the discussions of six peer-response groups in a sophomore-level writing workshop. In these discussions, the students (four of them per group) were dealing with their own papers -- some based on personal experience and some on public issues -- papers that were due to be revised. The class period before the workshop sessions, the students exchanged copies of their papers; they were to write

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out comments and bring those to the next class. Each student had also received copies of a set of questions intended to guide their responses; further, the instructor periodically held whole-class discussions of papers. The groups were formed by the instructor, who sought to establish a balance of strong and weak writers and of males and females in each group. My tape recordings were supplemented by personal observation and by the use of questionnaires and interviews with each student to learn about their attitudes toward the workshop experience and toward their own writing.

My analysis of the discussions focused on the suggestions the students offered one another for revising their papers, and I found that as far as content was concerned, the participants made the greatest number of suggestions with regard to the development of ideas and the clarification of awkward, ambiguous, or wordy sentences. They also offered a large number of suggestions on mechanics, a smaller number on organization, and a very few on narrowing or focusing the topic of a paper. In short, the students (who were mostly juniors and seniors) had clearly internalized the criteria that composition teachers typically use in responding to student papers. In addition, they generally applied these criteria in an accurate manner: in 60 percent of the cases, they offered a version of a sentence or paragraph that was superior to the original.

But as interesting as it is to examine the content of these suggestions, my concern here is not so much with the cognitive element of the discussions (that is, the suggestions themselves), as with the social element--the language through which these student writers related to one another as they exchanged and discussed their suggestions. To return to our central metaphor, I see the language of criticism as a recycleable element in this weaving process. Language is both the product and the stuff from which further meanings

are woven.

In my full-length study of the dynamics of the critiquing groups, I examined both the activities of the writers themselves and the activities of each group as a whole. My focus in this presentation, however, is on the writers and their role in weaving the web of critical response.

I found that the student writers engaged in four main types of verbal activity with regard to their own papers: first, they asked questions about their essays; second, they proposed their own suggestions for revising their work; third, they expressed agreement or disagreement with the recommendations of their peers; and finally, they explained the intentions behind their stylistic choices. I will explain each of these categories, comment briefly on the way each type of activity affected the flow of discussion, and then consider the implications of the findings as a whole. The first category, the writer's questions, can be subdivided into three parts: (1) general requests for criticism, initiated by the writers themselves, (2) requests for recommendations on specific passages--again, the requests came from the writers' initiative--and (3) questions about group members' suggestions and comments. One-fourth of the writers' questions fell into the first sub-category, general requests for criticism--"Tell me what's wrong with it," "What did you think of it?" and so on. Such requests usually seemed to indicate that the writers were granting permission to criticize, and they usually elicited specific recommendations from the group members.

Besides these general requests, another 50 percent of the student writers' questions dealt with specific passages or qualities of their writing, ranging from spelling and paragraphing to larger matters of organization and clarity. One student asked, for instance, if his intended sarcasm had been evident to his readers; another wanted to know whether the paper under

discussion was more coherent than his earlier essays. Interestingly enough, the majority of these specific questions were answered, not with specific advice, but with compliments, for instance, "It was good the way you did it." Apparently, the phrasing of these questions, usually to the effect of "Did you understand what I was getting at?" tended to elicit reassurance more often than advice.

In this first category of writers' questions, the final subdivision was inquiries about the suggestions offered by group members. Sometimes the writers simply wanted to clarify their peers' responses--"Did that confuse you?" one person might ask; at other times, the writers were asking for help in dealing with the problems their peers had identified, e.g., "How could I have changed that introduction so you wouldn't have trouble understanding where where I was going?" Questions such as these, as one might expect, usually called forth new ideas for improving the paper. They also signalled the fact that the writers were taking seriously the feedback of their peers.

Summing up this first type of activity, we see that the student writers did in fact raise questions about their own work and that those questions had two main goals: the writers wanted to know how their work had affected their peers and also how the writing could be improved. In both cases, the usual effect of questions was to open the gates of discussion: group members offered praise or made suggestions or did both.

In the second category of writer's activities, we see the students proposing suggestions about their own work and, occasionally, asking the group to evaluate the hypothetical effect of these proposed changes. In this second category, the writers sometimes proposed suggestions on their own initiative and sometimes offered them in response to the group members' comments. For instance, the writers pointed out terms which they realized they should

have identified for their readers; or they indicated statements which they now saw they should have elaborated on; or they proposed rephrasings of sentences which group members had already described as awkward or ambiguous. In setting forth their suggestions, the writers sometimes asked explicitly for feedback and sometimes simply set forth a suggestion almost as if they were talking to themselves.

In any case, the proposing of suggestions by the writers was usually greeted by expressions of approval: group members told why they thought a suggestion was a good one, or they expanded or paraphrased the writer's suggestion, or they agreed with one another's agreement. But this type of activity on the part of the writer never opened up any great amount of discussion--partly because the writers typically phrased their suggestions as hypotheses--"Maybe I could say more about that" -- a form which did not place on the hearers the same obligation to respond that a question would.

Just as the group members sometimes commented--usually approvingly--on the suggestions raised by the writers themselves, it would be only natural to expect that the writers in turn would comment on the ideas they received from their peers. And in fact this was the third category of writers' activities: agreeing or disagreeing with suggestions received. There were only a handful of outright expressions of disagreement in the fourteen sessions I recorded, and these varied sharply in their effect on the dynamics of the group. In two cases, one of the better writers flatly rejected a peer's suggestion, and his assured--I might say dogmatic--tone brought an end to that phase of discussion. On the other hand, disagreement sometimes opened up intense dialogue--for example, one of the groups urged a writer to use more transitions in her first paper, but she insisted that a greater degree of coherence would not fit the state of mind she was describing. Her style of rejecting suggestions opened up an effort on the part of the group to explain

the need for transitions (an effort which in this case proved futile!)

Much more frequent than such expressions of disagreement were responses of agreement or at least acceptance of a suggestion. Once in a while, writers were obviously saying "Yeah" or "OK" in order to get the suggestion-maker to stop talking; at other times, the "Yeah" was said hesitantly, as if the writer needed time to consider the effect of implementing that particular suggestion. Still other expressions of agreement sounded defensive, while others again indicated a welcoming of the suggestion. (It would require videotaping, though, to provide a full classification and interpretation of the many meanings of "Yes" in a context like this one.) Not surprisingly, the effect of most expressions of agreement was to bring an end to the current phase of discussion.

The final category of writers' activity involved explaining what they had been trying to do in their papers. Here again, a simple statement like "What I wanted to say was. . ." could have a variety of effects on the flow of discussion. On one hand, the writers might be amplifying on an experience or defending their way of doing things; in those instances, they usually gave the impression that they either knew what they were doing or they didn't want criticism, and the group ordinarily let them have the last word.

On the other hand, the writers sometimes talked about their intentions in such a way that they discovered the discrepancies between intention and execution. One girl, for instance, paraphrased the meaning of a statement which had been challenged, and then, when a group member said, "I know, but --" the writer finished the statement for him by admitting, "But I didn't explain it."

We have seen, then, that the student writers participated in group response to their papers in four main ways: raising questions, making suggestions about their own papers, commenting on the suggestions they received,

and discussing the purposes they had been trying to fulfill in their papers. What any given writer actually did during a particular session would of course vary with the writer's temperament, degree of satisfaction with the paper under discussion, and responsiveness of the group (including their interaction during the previous sessions).

Whatever the extent to which a given writer engaged in any of these activities, it is evident that the presence of a group of peers provided the students with opportunities to reflect on their work with a special degree of objectivity. To ask questions, to propose alternatives, to evaluate suggestions--all these activities demanded at least a rudimentary ability to stand outside one's work. But the act of decentering did not occur in isolation; the writers considered their work from the viewpoint of an actual audience. Before the discussion, as they reported, they anticipated questions and objections; during the discussion itself, they invited comment and took part in the flow of talk that produced, clarified, and modified those comments. Finally, a number of them noted during interviews that they kept in mind the criticism they received not only while they were revising that particular paper but also as they were working on succeeding assignments. One girl, for instance, who had been called to task by her group members for her vague and confusing use of pronouns commented, "now, when I type 'it,' I stop and think. . . . I'm explaining myself better now."

Thus both the tape recordings themselves and the students' own comments on questionnaires and in interviews bear testimony to the value of the peer-response experience. At the same time, observation and the students' comments reveal the kinds of limitations frequently associated with this approach. Most of the limitations cited by the students dealt with the dynamics of the groups as a whole or with the criticism which the members offered or failed

to offer. These weaknesses are familiar to anyone who has tried or even thought about using peer-response groups: the students' reluctance to offer negative criticism, their tendency to drift away from the task at hand, and their falling prey to the hazards of offering inaccurate advice, of spending too much time on minor weaknesses, and of overlooking problems in the paper.

However, since we have been focusing here on the activities of the writers, I would like to offer six hypotheses concerning limitations in the writers' participation in the critiquing process. I will then conclude by offering some general suggestions for dealing with these weaknesses.

My six hypotheses are as follows:

(1) Writers are not sure of their role in the peer-response process: Should they sit back and listen to comments? Should they defend their papers? Should they take the role of discussion leaders? There are many viable alternatives, but unless some guidelines are explicitly set, the writers may find that the web of meaning woven around their paper turns out to have a different pattern from what they'd anticipated--or even no pattern at all.

(2) Writers aren't sure how to stand outside their own writing, how to imagine alternatives to what they've actually done. This hypothesis gains support from a number of studies, such as those of Richard Beach, on the revision processes of various groups of writers.

(3) As a result of this difficulty in detaching themselves from their work, writers don't know what they want to know about their own papers beyond the basic "Was it clear? Was it interesting? Did I do it right?"

(4) Sometimes, student writers don't regard their peers as valid audiences. This may be because they are still on what James Britton calls the expressive level of writing: they aren't really writing for anyone besides themselves, or they may be--again, to use Britton's terminology--so accustomed to writing for teachers as examiners that they find it difficult to

write for other audiences and purposes and thus difficult to elicit criticism from these alternative audiences.

(5) Students who do value their peers' comments may still be unwilling to ask questions, raise their own alternatives, or discuss their intentions because they are reluctant to put critical thoughts into their classmates' minds. The attitude here--and it is an understandable one--seems to be "If I don't say anything, they won't notice the weak spots."

(6) Finally, the student writers assume that they know what their peers mean by a comment or suggestion, and they fail to derive full benefit from peer response because they don't ask for definitions, restatements, or illustrations. Once again, the cause may be apprehension: "If I ask her what she means by saying that my paper 'doesn't flow,' she might give me more criticism than I want."

If these hypotheses have validity, and I suspect that they do, then how do we as composition teachers, as expert weavers, intervene to help our student writers benefit more fully from the peer-response process? I have three main suggestions:

First, we need to instruct students as to the nature and purpose of criticism and we need to help them understand the dynamics of participation in critiquing groups. Besides providing theoretical instruction, we can model the process ourselves, both in whole-class discussions and in our responses to individual papers.

Second, we need to provide clear, explicit directions for the critiquing process. There are a great many ways to structure the discussions, and a wealth of recommendations can be found in the writings of such educators as Ken Bruffee, Thom Hawkins, Mary K. Healy, Peter Elbow, Stephen Judy, Ken Macrorie, and James Moffett. Their suggestions include such things as having

writers identify the rhetorical situation of each paper, having students write out comments before discussions begin, and providing a list of questions which both writers and responders can use as guides. Whatever strategies we choose, we need to let students--both writers and responders--know how to prepare for sessions and what to do with the ideas they have received, as well what to do during the sessions.

Third, we can reflect with students on the actual progress of their critiquing groups. Sitting in on the groups, having students keep logs on their groups' activities, and occasionally making tapes of the discussions and perhaps playing them back with the groups--these are a few of the ways in which students can tell us and one another, and we can tell them, how well their groups are working and how they might function even more fruitfully.

Our own intervention, of course, provides one more set of threads which the students in turn will need to weave into their own personal and communal webs of meaning. I believe that the more we help them to improve the quality of their peer groups, the more we will help them improve their own writing. We hope that they, like Whitman's "noiseless, patient spider," will fling a "gossamer thread" that will "catch somewhere"--in the minds and hearts of other readers.

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